



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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I'll Carry You

My name is Jenő Rosenberg. I was born and raised in Debrecin, Hungary where I lived with my parents and two brothers, Shya and Janki. My father was a distinguished Rabbi recognized in the Orthodox community, who published books about Jewish law and Torah. My grandfather who lived nearby, was also a Rabbi.

In 1944, the Nazi's invaded and occupied Hungary. Immediately, there was trouble. At the time, I was studying at a Yeshiva in Ladany and the Germans forced my school to close. On March 21st, 1944 I returned home to Debrecin. My parents and brother, Shya, were still there. My oldest brother, Janki, had to go into a working detail (forced labor) under the Hungarian Army. He left approximately two months before my return.

Everyday, the Germans would issue new decrees for the Jews and we were forced to obey. Jews "couldn't go here or there." If they were allowed to remain in business, storeowners could not stay open past certain times.

Eventually, our family and the other Jews of Debrecin were forced to move to a contained area. A gate was erected around one part of the city and that became the ghetto. Because there was a decree that stated Jews did not own property, we were forbidden from selling our homes before leaving. Families were simply expected to vacate their homes/apartments and pack up whatever they could. My family was forced to share one room, so we could only take a few belongings. I packed only the bare minimum; two or three bags, a few suits, bed linens and a mattress.

In the ghetto, the two Jewish communities, Orthodox and Modern, made sure that everyone could coexist. They were able to organize everyone fairly well. Religious Jews were able to stay with other religious Jews, while the nonreligious Jews were allowed to stay with the other nonreligious Jews. In the beginning, some people were allowed to leave the ghetto and buy food, however, this soon ended and the ghetto was sealed. Every week new rules were enforced that made daily living more and more difficult; yet religious life continued. People went to shul and were allowed to celebrate the holidays. The religious leadership from the congregation helped out to the best of their ability.

One day, we were told that we would be leaving the ghetto in two days. We packed what we could carry into a rucksack. I took a couple of shirts, a little of food, and most importantly, my tefillin. My mother sewed her jewelry and money into our clothing. She also took a few photos, but I can't remember what happened to them. Sadly we had to leave the elderly and the sick people behind. We heard stories about them being taken to the hospital, but we never really knew their fate.

We were taken to an old brick factory that had big open barracks where we were forced to sleep on straw. This was to be the new ghetto for a few days. There were only a few bathrooms and they were in terrible condition. The young people (and anyone who was able) did not use them. There was no longer any Kosher food available by this time.

During this move, my maternal grandparents were separated into a different group. We later found out that they died in Vienna during an allied bombing attack.

While in the brick factory, we were told that we would once again be leaving. We were forced to walk over 8 miles to an open area where we were to wait for a train. It took half a day to get there. It was the middle of July and everyone was hungry and hot. Many people could hardly walk or carry their baggage, so they would leave things behind. People walking would go through the abandoned luggage to look for food.

My brother and I were responsible for taking care of our 80 year-old paternal grandfather. We carried him on the journey and held him up when the Jews were forced to stand for long periods of time. Sadly, the other people who couldn't walk and didn't have help were left to die.

We knew we were being deported but did not know to where. We didn't have any real newspapers or radios so our only source of information was underground news and rumors. My uncle in Slovakia, who was deported in 1942, had sent our family a letter written in Talmudic language detailing his bad situation and mentioned killing and dying. He also wrote his father-in-law a postcard, saying in only a few words what was going on. So when we were going to be deported, we knew it wouldn't be good. We thought it could be to a work place, but no one knew exactly. If people did, they didn't talk about it.

It was either that day or the next when the train arrived to the outdoor plaza. We were pushed in like cattle, approximately 80 people if not more into each car. The doors were locked and there was no chance of escape. There was only one little window in the corner of the car. It was very hot and everyone wanted to get a little air so we arranged for everyone to have five minutes of fresh air. Every six hours, someone could go to the window for five minutes. We were organized because we had to be. It was very tight but luckily my family took over a corner. At this point, I was with my aunt, grandfather, parents and one brother. Once a day, the train stopped and the doors were opened. We were given a little bit of food and water. The bathroom situation was a problem. Once the pot was full, someone would dump it out the window. Everyone was very hungry. I was lucky because we were able to eat some food we had picked up from people's bags that had been dropped along the march. My father and grandfather ate even less because they would only eat Kosher food. During the journey, our family talked a lot and prayed.

After five/six days on the train, we reached the Polish/Slovakia border. We knew where we were because we could see the Polish letters through the window. Kysok was the last Slovakia village. Everyone was worried by the notion that we could possibly be going to Poland. Although we didn't know about the crematoriums at Aushwitz, we were terrified of being sent there, because we knew how bad it was from our Uncle's letter and from other people's talk of dying and being killed there. We stayed at the Kysok border for approximately two days. Then to our amazement, the train began to move backwards very quickly. We passed one city after the next. We went past Budapest, and then we

started to see the Austrian border. Everyone wondered where we were going. We finally arrived in the town of Strasshof- outside of Vienna.

There had been three trains that left Debrecin. Two of them went to Auschwitz. Our train, which carried approximately 3,000 people (forty cars with 80 people), was miraculously redirected. I believe there was bargaining done on our behalf done by Rabbi Weismadel, but we never knew why our train was selected to go back.

From the train, we could see that we had arrived at a concentration camp named Strasshof. When we got off, we could barely walk. We were taken to a building and the men and women were separated. Everyone was forced to undress and leave all of their belongings for disinfection. We were sprayed, showered and disinfected. Nobody told us anything, and we certainly did not expect to be shown any kindness. We were shocked when we came back and discovered that all of our stuff was lying as we had left it, including our yamakas and tefillin. Suddenly we thought that perhaps we weren't dying. When the women came out, we were so relieved to discover that they too were all still alive as well. We were told to line up and were then taken to an open kitchen with a caldron to get food where we were given an aluminum plate. My father and grandfather didn't want to eat because the food wasn't Kosher so we were able to get bread. My brother and I snuck back into the line to get them more bread and potatoes.

We stayed at Strasshof for about a week. The men and women had separate sleeping quarters with beds made out of straw. The camp was more organized than the last camp we had been to. Every day we went to sleep, woke up and got in line for food. One day they started to send groups out to work. Men and women were allowed to go together. When an announcement was made looking for 50 people to work, my family volunteered.

Somehow we were separated from my aunt and grandfather. We were taken to a workplace in the forest approximately 100 km from Vienna to do forestry work. The group of 50 people stayed in a building with two rooms (one for men and one for women), a kitchen and a foyer. Although the food wasn't Kosher, we still had food; bread, potatoes, and some vegetables. My brother and I bartered and stole for Kosher foods for our father. My mother found a little dish and tried to cook for him. When we were given meat, we traded it for Kosher food. Everyone worked in the forest cutting trees and fixing roads. The forester was an Austrian but not a Nazi, and he showed us how to do this. He would mark the trees that were to be cut down usually because they were either unhealthy or they were in the way. The work was tedious but we were lucky that there were no Nazis based at our new workplace.

Our family lived and worked in the forest for about three months from July to September. We had decent living and were able to predict our way of life. We woke up, went to work, knew who was coming and going, what was expected of us and approximately how much food we would have to eat each day. There wasn't a lot of food, but we were able to manage. Even though they were Jews, the other people in our group were not religious. In fact, some people were even anti-religious! My father held services on Friday nights and many people came, including some cute girls.

One day, my father asked if the forester (lager fuhrer) would bring my grandfather to us. The forester inquired on his behalf and discovered that my grandfather was approximately 80 km away in Austria. The place where he was needed four more people, so the forester told us that we could go be with him. On a Monday morning in October, he ordered a cart for us, and our family went to be with our grandfather.

Our new camp was called Waidhofen on the Thayer. It was located in a city at the end of the street. There were approximately 150 people there, Jewish and mostly Hungarian. We stayed here until Christmas.

Our family was assigned to one room. At the camp, we found my aunt and grandfather as well as another aunt and her two children (the uncle was sent to Russia, where he died.) My family and I helped my aunt take care of the kids: a two-year-old and a four-year-old. Besides our physical labor job, road building, our other responsibility was potty training the children. At this work camp, we were not in fear of our lives and life was bearable, but we were still prisoners. We received only the basics and had no freedom or entertainment.

The lager fuhrer was a crazy Nazi. I remember he was always “screaming at the top of his lungs,” and using violent language. However, he wasn’t that bad compared to other Nazi officers. He never hit or shot anyone but he did steal food to make money on the Black Market.

When the war was over, I heard that he received approximately 20 years in jail. He wanted some of his former prisoners to be witnesses and say that he wasn’t that bad. I believe some people testified for him.

The conditions weren’t bad for my grandfather because he could sleep and discuss the Torah weekly portions. We even had a little food. Luckily my grandfather didn’t eat much, so it was never a problem to get him bread and trade him kosher food. Soon however, the conditions worsened, the camp was dissolved and we were forced to leave. It was Christmas- December of 1944.

Many of the Austrian camps were being dissolved and the prisoners were deported to various locations. People were no longer being sent to Auschwitz though. Some people were forced to go on death marches to “bad” places in lower Germany, including Buchenwald and Dachau.

We were among 2000 of the lucky ones sent to Theresienstadt. Again we boarded the cattle train, but the conditions this time were much better. We were given a little water and food and the trains were partially open. Our journey took about 3-4 days.

Theresienstadt was a big city with several castles, including military castles (which looked like Fort Bragg). There were many Jewish people of different nationalities there. They had been deported much earlier than those from Hungary and were able to tell us

about the atrocities they had witnessed. Theresienstadt had been a concentration camp at one point and thousands of people had died there. The “new” Theresienstadt was more like a ghetto however. A big wall was built on the edge of the city but people were free to roam the streets, looking for food and jobs. I was assigned a job to help keep the city clean. The only job that actually seemed necessary was to make sure that no one went to the area where people had previously been killed to forage through the bodies and collect items left behind. At night- when no one was looking, some boys and I went in and took some items that we needed, including jackets and shoes. There were no grocery stores, but there were a couple of kitchens that people would be assigned to. We would line up three times a day at our assigned kitchen to get food. As always, my brother and I would barter for Kosher foods for our father and grandfather. By Passover (April), a Kosher kitchen was organized.

During the day, we did some work to keep the city clean. A cultural life was established for the nighttime. We had a few good things during the bad time- especially education and entertainment. We were able to create pulpits and conduct religious services. My father would lead the services and try to give encouragement to those attending. It was a good memory. Some people made up plays to lighten the mood within our community. We tried to live like people- not animals.

Three weeks before liberation, the Danish Jews were released after a negotiation done by the Danish King. The Danish Jews including men, women and children were put on the buses one morning and sent back to Denmark. The German officers oversaw the release to maintain security. At that point, we knew that the end of the war was near. We were starting to hear rumors that the Allies landed and the Russians liberated Hungary and Romania.

On May 7, 1945, the German soldiers and tanks were running back and forth before they finally disappeared. On May 8, 1945 the Russians liberated Theresienstadt. We went out to the streets to greet them. The soldiers threw candy and food. There was nobody left to tell us what to do, but we stayed for a while because we had nowhere to go.

The Jewish relief organizations soon arrived and began to help people return to their cities/countries. Everything was so disorganized at first, but within two months they established order. In June, we were released from Theresienstadt and put on a train to Budapest. Our journey took about 5 days to a week and we were given food and water. Everything was chaotic and the train would stop for long periods of time.

Budapest had been liberated in January and by the time of our arrival, had a lively life. Some survivors that remained hidden there during the war had revived the Jewish council. Being that it was so well-organized, they helped my family return to Debricin after a day or two.

Debrechin had been liberated in October, so by the time our family arrived in July, it was in working order. We went straight to our old apartment and it was completely intact.

Nobody was living there. A little furniture remained but most of our belongings were gone. Yet unlike many other Jews, we were able to return to our home. My maternal grandfather's house had been burned down. At that point, we knew of the atrocities people had faced, as they were able to share the horrific details. Only 1/3 of the population, including small young children, returned to Debrecin after the war. Unfortunately, very few young boys, including my brother's and my friends, survived.

The religious council arranged for us to get furniture (table, beds, chairs), but they didn't have books. The synagogue was still in good condition. The day after we arrived, my father returned to work as a Rabbi. In fact, the first day back, he performed a wedding!

People started searching for items that were hidden from the Nazis. My mother was able to find some items that were hidden by our outhouse.

Synagogue life was again organized and stores were reopened. Hungary had done a good job of restoring life and trying to help its citizens to return to normalcy. Forced by the Allies, the Hungarian government gave the Jewish community money to operate.

I felt safe and welcome in Debrecin. I needed to recuperate from the war though. After the high holidays, I returned to school at a new Yeshiva. In 1949, I left Hungary alone because nobody wanted to go with me. My middle brother, Shya, left Hungary in 1946 to look for a new life. Communism was taking over and we all knew that Hungary was no longer a place for the Jews, especially the religious ones.

I illegally walked the whole night to Slovakia. From Slovakia, I went to Vienna. I stayed there for a couple of months and ended up in a DP camp where I was given money and food. I then travelled to England where I spent the next 5 years at a Yeshiva. Then I came to the United States as a student. I extended my Visa for as long as possible and then applied for a Green card.

At the age of 89, my grandfather died in Debrecin. In 1956, my parents went to Switzerland, where my father was taken as a Rabbi. In 1957, I filed papers for them to come to the United States. They settled in an apartment in Williamsburg, New York. They eventually moved to Boro Park. I met my wife in 1960. She was also a survivor, born in Hungary and had had been given to a Christian woman at 3 years of age.

My wife and I had four children, twenty-one grandchildren before she died in 1990. I celebrate her memory, as well as those who are no longer alive with my children, grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. My brother, Shya, lives nearby and we see each other frequently.